

ADDRESS BY PRESIDENT CYRIL RAMAPHOSA ON THE OCCASION OF NATIONAL
FREEDOM DAY CELEBRATIONS

MIKI YILI STADIUM, MAKHANDA

27 APRIL 2019

Minister of Arts and Culture, Mr Nathi Mthethwa,

Ministers and Deputy Ministers,

Premier of the Eastern Cape, Mr Phumulo Masualle,

Executive Mayor of the Sarah Baartman District Municipality, Ms Khunjuzwa
Kekana,

MECs and members of the Provincial Legislature,

Your majesties, traditional leaders,

Representatives of various political formations,

Civil society representatives,

Members of the media,

Fellow South Africans,

We are gathered here to celebrate the day we won our freedom.

We are gathered here in the Eastern Cape – in the land of heroes and legends – to recall the battles that were fought, the setbacks that were suffered and the great victories achieved along our march to democracy.

It was here, on this soil, that the so-called Frontier Wars with European settlers were fought in the 19th century by a people determined to remain independent and free in the land of their forebearers.

It was here, 200 years ago that a mighty rebellion against the British occupation took place at the Battle of Grahamstown.

And so I shall begin by paying tribute to our ancestors who once lived on this land, whose unconquerable spirits still dwell among us.

Had it not been for their courage, their steadfastness and their acts of valour, we would not be the free people we are today.

We have inherited this freedom from iqhawe Makhanda ka Nxele, the warrior, sangoma and prophet who led the attack on the British garrison at Egazini in the Battle of Grahamstown.

We have inherited this freedom from iqhawe Mangaliso Robert Sobukwe, a son of this province, who founded the Pan Africanist Congress to push for self-determination for the country's majority based on the principle of African nationalism.

We have inherited this freedom from iqhawekazi Sarah Baartman, who lies buried in the town of Hankey not far from here.

She was a daughter of this land, taken to Europe and humiliated to satisfy the curiosity and cruelty of others.

We have inherited this freedom from iqhawe Bantu Steven Biko, the young activist from King William's Town whose ideas on black consciousness continue to influence generations long after his passing.

We have also inherited this freedom from Nomzamo Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, from Albertina Sisulu, from Oliver Reginald Tambo, from Walter Sisulu, from Chris Hani, from Charlotte Masekela from all the heroes of the Eastern Cape and beyond – who spared neither effort nor strength to achieve our freedom.

We have inherited this freedom from Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela who led our people to democracy and became our first democratically elected President of South Africa.

It is their legacy that inspired many of our people to continue the struggle.

We pay tribute to the determined students here in Makhanda who led a movement to open our universities to all South Africans, especially the poor.

It was here also that students led protests against the scourge of gender-based violence on our campuses and in our communities.

We salute all these heroes and heroines who have departed this life and those still among us.

Fellow South Africans,

On this day 25 years ago, we founded a new country defined by the principles of equality, unity, non-racialism and non-sexism.

Despite the passage of time, it is a day we remember vividly – the exhilaration of seeing nearly 20 million South Africans of all races waiting patiently at polling stations around the country to cast their ballots.

For those of a certain age, we remember the moment we placed a cross on a ballot paper for the first time in our lives.

I remember voting at Kloof Gold mine in Westonaria among the mine workers who built the country's wealth, but had never before been accorded the most basic right of citizenship.

On this Freedom Day, as we celebrate this great human achievement, we must reflect on how far we have travelled over the last quarter century.

We must reflect on the progress we have made in setting right the wrongs of the past, in bringing development to communities where there was once only neglect, in restoring human dignity where there was once only contempt.

Under colonial and apartheid rule, black South Africans were reduced to servitude in the land of their ancestors.

They had, as the African Claims reminds us, no freedom of movement, no freedom of choice of employment, no right of choice of residence, and – with a few exceptions – no right to purchase land anywhere, from anyone.

By contrast, white South Africans reaped the benefits of full citizenship, enjoying educational opportunities, health care and basic services and sheltered employment through job reservation.

Having access to land, property and other assets enabled them to accumulate the material means to sustain themselves and enable them and their children to lead lives of quality.

Denied decent education, prevented from seeking employment in all but a few occupations, squeezed into overcrowded townships and bantustans, their every movement controlled and their communities terrorised, their health stunted by disease and malnutrition, black South Africans were destined for a life of misery.

The great tragedy of apartheid was that it placed with great deliberation South Africans of different races on opposite ends of the scale of human endeavor and development.

More than that, the great tragedy of apartheid was the deep divisions it sowed amongst us.

We came to regard those from a different race, religion, social background, region and tribe with fear, mistrust and suspicion.

Segregation was brutally enforced, across the hills and the valleys, in the cities and the towns, in parks and on beaches, in factories and offices, on buses and trains.

Relationships between men and women across the colour line were forbidden by law.

Black children were denied the opportunity to learn and to play alongside white children.

Such was the brutality of our history, that many wondered if we would ever heal the scars of the past.

In his poem 'Sea and Sand', Don Mattera offered the following prayer:

"Bless the children of South Africa

The white children

And the black children

But more the black children

Who lost the sea and sand

That they may not lose love

For the white children

Whose fathers raped the land"

Fellow South Africans,

On this Freedom Day, we have much to celebrate.

Most prominent among our achievements has been the promotion of our nationhood in a united, non-racial, non-sexist and democratic South Africa.

Our new nationhood manifests itself in many ways. Today the children of our land, black and white, can learn in the same schools, and study in the same universities and colleges.

When democracy came, we did not sink into the abyss of vengeance and retribution.

This place on which we stand was once the site of battle between an occupying power and a defiant people.

Today it is a place where their descendants – both black and white – walk free from tyranny. Where this country's majority once lived lives of subjugation, today

all South Africans enjoy equal rights before the law. Our Constitution is the main pillar of our democracy. It is the safeguard of our independence and the expression of our commitment to human rights.

It is the work of the struggles of the masses and embodies the aspirations of millions of South Africans who had a role in crafting it. It is what unites us. It is the beacon of our people's aspirations and their shield.

The Constitution is an enduring symbol of our commitment to heal the rifts that once divided us, and to put aside the bitterness of the past to build a common future.

Despite the progress we have made, we are still confronted by sinister attempts to undermine the unity of our nation through acts of racism, through attacks on foreign nationals, and in the open display of the old South African flag.

Out of respect for our Constitution – and in defence of our freedom – we reject racism, we reject the pledging of allegiance to a racist past and its symbols, we reject attacks on those who have sought refuge in our country, and we reject violence, insurrection and disregard for the rule of law.

The sacrifices of our forebearers were too great, and the price they paid too high, for us to see our hard-won gains diminished by intolerance.

Although we have achieved much in the last 25 years, we still have much further to travel.

Our nation can only be truly united when all South Africans have a shared experience of lives of comfort and security.

Ours is still a deeply unequal country.

There are great divisions between rich and poor, between urban and rural, between men and women, between those with jobs and those who are unemployed, between those who own land and those who were deprived of it.

In the past 25 years considerable progress has been made in improving the material conditions of our people.

Working together, we have built housing for millions of South Africans, provided water, sanitation and electricity to poor households across the country.

From the dark days of bantu education, we have dramatically expanded access to education – from early childhood development through to school and to university and college.

More than 9 million learners attend no-fee schools, with an equal amount provided with a meal at school.

Seven in ten South Africans make use of the country's network of primary health care, clinic and hospital facilities either entirely for free or for a minimal fee.

More than 17 million social grants are paid to poor and vulnerable South Africans each month.

Through our public employment programmes, we have provided a basic income and work experience and training opportunities for many of the unemployed.

Over the last 25 years, the economy has doubled in size and the number of people in employment has increased by 8 million.

And yet, despite these remarkable achievements, too many of our people still live in poverty, too many are unemployed, too many are homeless, too many do not have the basic necessities of life.

As we celebrate 25 years of democracy, we need to focus all our attention and efforts on ensuring that all South Africans can equally experience the economic and social benefits of freedom.

We cannot be a nation of free people when so many still live in want.

We cannot be a nation of free people when so many live without enough food, without proper shelter, without access to quality health care, without a means to earn a living.

We cannot be a nation of free people when the residents of places like Makhanda have to go for so long without a reliable supply of clean water.

We cannot be a nation of free people when funds meant for the poor are wasted, lost or stolen.

And so we enter the next 25 years of freedom with a renewed determination to realise for all South Africans the promise of the democratic breakthrough of 1994.

We enter a new phase in the life of our nation determined to build an economy that serves all, to create the jobs that our people need, to develop the skills and talents that the future demands, and to build stable, safe and thriving communities.

We do so encouraged by the achievements of the first 25 years of democracy and inspired by the struggles that our people have waged over generations.

Eleven days from now, on the 8th of May, millions of South Africans will again exercise their hard-won right to vote.

Like those who went to the polls for the first time in 1994, they will hold in their hands the destiny of our nation.

They will assert, as free women and men, the fundamental principle that no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of all the people.

They will assert that, as citizens, we all have a responsibility to take an interest and play a role in the betterment of ourselves and our communities – whether it is as active parents in our school governing bodies, in community policing forums, in campaigns against social ills like substance abuse and gender-based violence, or in keeping our streets, towns and cities clean.

It is up to each one of us to play our part in making South Africa better.

As better brothers, as sisters, as husbands, as wives, as children, as classmates, as co-workers, as neighbours, and as citizens.

On this Freedom Day let us therefore resolve that we will work to address our challenges together.

Bound by a common cause, we fought apartheid together and triumphed.

Together we can overcome the challenges of the present.

Regardless of race, creed, disability, sexual orientation, religion or social standing, we share as a source of pride the name “South African”.

It belongs to each and every one of us, and we wear it with honour.

United by our love for freedom and our commitment to see our great nation thrive and prosper, let us move forward together towards achieving a stronger, greater, more compassionate, more united and harmonious South Africa.

I thank you.